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THE VIRTUE OF CONSERVATION

Editorial | Summon the energy

As they recover from the shock of \$3-a-gallon gasoline, Americans probably can't imagine worse consumer fallout from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, especially on a warm fall afternoon.

But winter's chill is around the corner. As soon as heaters go on, the long-gone hurricanes will deliver another wallop. The Department of Energy is predicting home-heating costs to rise a staggering 47 percent over last winter's.

Eighty percent of Gulf of Mexico natural-gas production remains offline because of the hurricanes. Fifteen percent of oil refiners could be out for several more weeks. That's taking a tremendous toll on preparations for the winter heating season.

Unlike oil, there's no strategic reserve or international agency to bolster natural-gas supplies. A shortage could last months, meaning steep price hikes and much pain for consumers, especially the poor.

Which may, in part, explain President Bush's unexpected Road to Damascus moment last week.

"We can all pitch in by being better conservers of energy," the President said Monday. "There's ways for the federal government to lead when it comes to conservation."

The Texas oilman has long pursued a strictly supply-side energy policy, keeping with Vice President Cheney's 2001 declaration that "conservation may be a sign of personal virtue, but it cannot be the basis of a sound energy policy."

After Katrina, even Cheney says he'll give efficiency a try.

It's about time. The United States consumes 25 percent of the world's oil, but has only 3 percent of its reserves. This nation cannot drill its way out of its energy problems. Any sensible energy policy would ask Americans to conserve fuel.

Last week, President Bush issued a directive canceling nonessential federal travel; urging carpooling, mass transit and telecommuting; and cracking down on inefficient appliances and peak-time consumption. Tomorrow, the Department of Energy, partnering with the nonprofit Alliance to Save Energy, will launch a public-education campaign called "Powerful Savings." It will focus on weatherizing homes before winter. These are small, overdue steps in the right direction.

With his new consciousness, Bush should accept the challenge of Ford Motor Co. CEO Bill Ford for an energy summit with automakers. "As you know, none of us can do this alone," Ford said in a letter to Bush. "But if we all work together - automakers, suppliers, fuel providers, consumers and state and federal government - I am confident we can overcome the great energy challenges facing our country."

Reps. Ed Markey (D., Mass.) and Sherwood Boehlert (R., N.Y.) would be happy to come to discuss their reasonable proposal to boost vehicle gas-mileage standards from 27.5 to 33 m.p.g. over 10 years. That modest improvement could save 2.6 million barrels of oil by 2025.

Too many other members of Congress are still mired in warmed-over ideas. House committees last week passed legislation to ease environmental restrictions on refinery expansion, and to drill offshore and in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. These measures have failed before - for good reason.

The President is right, though tardy, to focus on conservation. Americans - beginning with Congress - should follow his lead.